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SUBJECT: Belarus Cozies Up to Iran

Ref: Minsk 337

11. (SBU) Summary: In recent months Belarus and Iran have greatly increased their contacts and friendly rhetoric, including an invitation for Belarusians to work on the Iranian nuclear program and improve trade ties. Belarusian factories are being founded in Iran, and Iranian businessmen are searching Belarus for investment opportunities. To top off this growing friendship, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament is expected in Minsk in December. End summary.

#### Iran Invites Belarusian Nuclear Scientists

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12. (U) On October 11, Iran's Ambassador to Belarus Abdulhamid Fekri told reporters Iran invited Belarusian scientists to work on Iran's nuclear program. He did not say if any concrete offers were made. Fekri naturally stressed that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, and only faces problems internationally because the U.S. wants to control Iranian oil. He added that Belarus would come under similar pressure if it goes ahead with plans to build a nuclear power plant (reftel). Fekri also thanked Belarus for its unwavering international support.

13. (U) On September 19 in New York, Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov told Iran's FM that, "Belarus fully recognizes and supports Iran's right to develop and use peaceful nuclear technologies, provided the country observe the non-proliferation regime." According to the press, during the meeting the two agreed to further develop relations at the highest level, increase cooperation on the international scene, and boost bilateral trade.

#### Increasing Commercial Ties

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14. (SBU) In the past several months Belarus and Iran have vastly increased their commercial ties. On October 12 Belarus' MFA announced Iran had agreed to buy 500 tractors from the Minsk Tractor Plant (MTZ). [Note: "tractors" here

means unspecified road and farm machinery.] On the same day Iranian Ambassador Fekri said Belarus and Iran had agreed to build an assembly plant for the Minsk Tractor Plant in Busher, and to build an assembly plant for tractor-mounted agricultural equipment in Shiraz. [Note: the Minsk Tractor Plant produces tractors, road equipment, and heavy off-road capable equipment. Much of this is dual purpose.] In June 2004 MAZ created a joint venture, MAZIRAN, that in its first year assembled 130 MAZ trucks in Iran, worth USD 15 million. The Belarusian Embassy in Tehran manages a network of repair centers for Belarusian vehicles, and reportedly opened a maintenance and storage center in a Tehran industrial area.

¶5. (SBU) In late July, representatives of Iran's Khodro carmaker visited Minsk. With the aid of Vladimir Konoplev, speaker of the lower house of parliament, Khodro announced plans to start producing cars in Belarus. Khodro plans to work with Belarusian company Unison (managed by Konoplev aide Aleksey Vaganov) to produce 2,000 cars a year to start, with growth of up to 30,000 vehicles annually. In September, Iranian businessmen visited Minsk to investigate the possibility of producing Samant cars in Belarus as well.

¶6. (U) Iran's Keyson company has agreed to build a USD 113.05 million transport service complex near Minsk on the Brest-Moscow highway. The first stage, worth USD 50 million, is scheduled to be complete by 2013 and will include a motel and service areas for trucks. Another unnamed Iranian company is reportedly building a USD 6 million office and commercial center in Minsk. Iranian businessmen have reportedly come to Minsk to investigate investing in woodworking, additional construction projects, and the purchase of potassium fertilizers.

¶7. (U) Belarusian exports for 2004 rose 62.5 percent to USD 33.3 million, according to the GOB. Belarus mainly exports truck tractors, road and construction equipment, and dump trucks. It also exported lesser amounts of acrylic fibers, potassium fertilizers and tire-cord fiber. Iran is believed to have exported USD 3.4 million worth of goods to Belarus in 2004, although it is unclear what those goods were.

#### Loving Rhetoric

¶8. (U) Both sides have engaged in recent months with public exhortations of friendship. Speaking to a group of Iranian politicians and businessmen in Minsk on September 14, Konoplev said, "We have met with our Iranian friends more often recently." On August 31, chairman of the Iranian legislature Gholam Ali Hadda Adel stated to the Belarusian Ambassador, "Iran and Belarus adhere to similar stances on many international problems: Tehran and Minsk are both concerned about NATO's eastward enlargement, are interested in the creation of a nuclear free zone, and support efforts to combat international terrorism." Ambassador Leonid Rachkov replied, "The West seeks to dominate the world," therefore Belarus-Iranian cooperation was "increasingly more important geopolitically."

¶9. (U) Iranian Ambassador Fekri told reporters in July that ever since President Mohammed Khatami visited Minsk in September 2004, "relations were developing every day and every hour."

¶10. (U) In May the Belarusian parliament ratified an agreement on administrative assistance and customs cooperation with Iran. It also ratified a security agreement aimed at combating smuggling of historic and cultural goods, arms and ammunition, explosives, fighting money laundering, trafficking in people, cyber crime, and "crimes against the national security of the state."

#### And Both Want to Increase Scientific Cooperation

¶11. (U) According to the press, on October 22 Belarusian Ambassador to Tehran Leonid Rachkov told Iran's Minister of Science, Research and Technology Mohammed-Mehdi Zahedi that Belarus would like to increase scientific cooperation with Iran. He specifically mentioned increasing bilateral relations on information technology, power generation, environmental protection, and medical engineering. Rachkov also called for increasing academic exchanges, conducting joint research, and invited Zahedi to Belarus "to sign joint agreements."

#### Visits/meetings

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¶12. (U) Lukashenko spent less than a day in New York at the UNGA, and only managed a handful of meetings. However, he did find time to meet with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad to discuss "trade, economic and political cooperation." [Note: Lukashenko also met with the Iraqi and Moldovan presidents, and the head of the CIS.]

¶13. (U) To facilitate travel, in July Iran began offering Belarusians free visas upon arrival in Tehran, Esfahan, Tabriz and Mashad. The Iranian Ambassador to Minsk is also reportedly trying to establish a direct air link between Minsk and Tehran.

¶14. (U) A surprising number of Iranian delegations travel to Minsk [Note: contacts report they travel by air through Kiev.] In September, delegations included the heads of the commissions for agriculture, water, natural resources, and mining of the Assembly of the Islamic Council, as well as businessmen from an Iranian tractor plant. In June, Iranian businessmen visited Gomel Oblast, where they are considering starting a woodworking business and investing in the Oktyabrsky Dried Fat-Free Milk Plant. The Speaker of the Iranian parliament is scheduled to visit Minsk in December.

#### Birds of a Feather

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¶15. (SBU) Comment: With Minsk and Teheran generally isolated internationally, it is little surprise they are cozying up to each other, even despite their complete lack of historical cultural ties. In a similar vein Lukashenko recently hosted the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, and has reached out to other pariahs, such as Syria and Cuba. With his access to the First World restricted by his own policies, Lukashenko is seeking friends who are not so choosy.

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